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**FAO Special Programme for Food Security: Problem and Opportunities in Reaching  
Rural Women in the Uplands of Northern Laos**

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## **FAO Special Programme for Food Security: Problems and Opportunities in Reaching Rural Women in the Uplands of Northern Laos.**

### **Abstract**

In achieving food security and poverty reduction in the Uplands of Lao, it is crucial to include gender analysis. Women are often ignored, overlooked or forgotten in many agricultural programmes, although they are the backbone of most agricultural production, processing, and marketing, as well as domestic work and household economy. The current general lack of reliable data and the lack of recognising and valuating women's unpaid work in agriculture hampers a complete understanding of the situation and environment upland women work and live in. Extension services, Government and international agencies need to better understand gender issues and women's needs in order to establish proper programmes and appropriate technologies.

To facilitate sharing of experiences, innovations, ideas and the dissemination of technical know-how, the Special Programme for Food Security (SPFS) operating in Luang Namtha and Oudomxai uses the concept of Farmers' Field School (FFS). Livestock and mushroom production FFS are well attended by women, since this is mainly their domain. These activities require limited land, which is a resource to which women have limited access: Only one woman in the SPFS's northern project sites has an official land title. The main constraints and difficulties in reaching upland women are limited gender awareness of staff, no or little understanding of the Lao language by upland women and no understanding of local language by project staff, and limited available time of both women and project staff. To increase and encourage women participation, SPFS tries to organise separate meetings at convenient time and location for women, select topics of interest to women, and look at workload of newly introduced technologies. The project is also stimulating that gender is taken into account in the development of training materials, manuals and participatory training programmes of FFS activities. For the coming year, SPFS will include gender training and curriculum building activities in FFS and collect information on gender that can be discussed and analysed during FFS activities or other meetings. Finally, providing more hands-on field training for government and project staff in gender disaggregated data collection, compilation and analysis is needed.

### **1. Background Special Programme for Food Security (SPFS)**

FAO estimates that 800 million people are still subject to under-nourishment. 70% of the poor live in rural areas where agriculture is the main provider of food, employment and income opportunities. In Lao PDR, 50% of the provinces are still food insufficient, especially the North (NIAPP 2000). The development of the agricultural sector is vital for the success of any national strategy towards poverty alleviation. This reasoning provided the main rationale for FAO's Special Programme for Food Security, which focuses on improving the food production and productivity of small farmers and their access to food (SPFS website).

The Special Programme for Food Security (SPFS) in Lao PDR is funded by the Government of Japan and implemented by the Government of Lao PDR (GOL) under the initiative of the

National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Service (NAFES). A team of national experts runs the five-year programme, which started in May 2001. The programme will strengthen human capacity, boost food production through intensification and diversification and increase household income.

SPFS focuses on participatory and demand-driven approach, which is an important part of the programme's capacity building support. All activities accommodate community needs. The main food security concern of all target villages is achieving rice-sufficiency throughout the year. Other priorities are improvement of on-farm water management; animal husbandry practices; vegetable and fruit production; handicraft development; post-harvest and agro-processing and forest resource management.

## **2. Socio-economic profiles sites in the North**

SPFS currently works in 4 provinces (Luang Namtha, Oudomxay, Vientiane and Bolikhamxay) and 6 different sites in line with the Government's priorities on poverty alleviation. All sites are vulnerable to food insecurity and have a substantial level of rice insecurity for three to six months of the year. Five site selection criteria are set forth in the SPFS guidelines: 1. *National food security importance*, 2 *Replicability*, 3 *Availability in province of sustainable technologies for demonstration*, 4 *Interest of local communities*, and 5 *Vulnerability to food insecurity*.

### **a) Nam Leu in Luang Namtha**

The village is located about 14 km from the provincial capital, has 57 households and a population of 395 inhabitants. The average household size is of 6 persons. The village has a multiple ethnic composition comprising of 47 Laenten<sup>1</sup> and 18 Khamu<sup>2</sup> households. The population is relatively young almost 40 % is under the age of 14 years. Females represent almost 52% of the population. There is shortage of labour because of the young population and the number of opium-addicted persons in the village<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Laenten or Lao Huay originates from the Yao ethnic group who migrated from Southern China. They have their own language script similar to Chinese.

<sup>2</sup> Khamu sub-ethnic group belonging to the Austro-Asiatic or Mon-Khmer ethno-linguistic group. They are the inhabitants of Laos in pre-historic times.

<sup>3</sup> According to the village chief, about 50 persons (13,2%) in the village are opium addicts. At the district level, Namtha has 766 opium addicts, (UNODC Laos Opium Survey 2003)

The economy of the village relies largely on traditional shifting cultivation with some lowland cultivation, on exploitation of non-timber forest products (NTFP), and on the production of handicrafts. Animal husbandry is not well developed due to high incidences of fowl and pig diseases. The average income per household is estimated around US\$ 270 per year. 63% of the household income comes from paddy production, 11% from cattle production and about 21% from off-farm activities. Namleu has severe food vulnerability and a substantial level of rice insecurity with 93% percent of the households facing three to six months rice deficit. The production of rice is low (115 kg/person/year) and not sufficient. There are no landless farmers in the village and everybody has access to land for rice cultivation. However, rice cultivation is limited due to limited lowland paddy area and low yield of up-land rice (less than 1 ton/ha). Shifting cultivation cycle is short with fallow periods of only 3 to 4 years. Only 38% of the households have access to lowland paddy fields with an average size of 0.72 ha.

Table 1: Nam Leu rice production per capita

Paddy Field	Area (ha)	No. of house-holds	Average farm size (ha)	Area planted (ha)	Area harvested (ha)	Estimated yield (kg/ha)	Estimated production (kg)
Low land	18	25	0.72	18	18	2,000	36,000
Upland	216	45	4.8	40	40	1,000	40,000
Dry season	0	0	0	0	0		
Total	234			58	58		76,000
Average paddy production per capita (kg)							192.40
Average rice production per capita (kg)							115.44

Source: SPFS Baseline Survey

The district authority completed land demarcation and allocation and about 2,542 ha were allocated to the village of which 97% includes forestland including old shifting cultivation fallow land. This has resulted in relative easy access to NTFP and wildlife as food resources. Due to increased population density, and the construction of the hydro-electricity dam in the lower part of the river, there is over-exploitation in the forest area, rivers and streams.

#### **b) Nasengkham in Oudomxay**

This village is located about 3.5 km from the national road and 7 km from the provincial capital. The village has 56 households and a population of 378 inhabitants. The population comprises of only one ethnic group, the Hmong (Lao Sung<sup>4</sup>). The population is relatively

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<sup>4</sup> Mountain people

young; almost 45 % is under the age of 14 years. Females represent almost 53% of the population. There is shortage of farm labour due to opium addiction among productive male adults and migration to town centres in search of more profitable employment opportunities.

The economy of the village depends on agricultural production and on- and off-farm production due to its location near the provincial capital. 82% of the households have access to lowland paddy cultivation. Cash crops, starchy root crops, vegetable and opium are cultivated in the upland areas. A traditional weir and canals have been constructed to supplement water during the wet season. Animal husbandry is not well developed due to high incidences of fowl, cattle and pig diseases and lack of grazing land for cattle.

The villagers are restricted to very limited land (307 ha) with only 77 ha demarcated as cultivation land. Because of this limitation, most villagers are cultivating in remoter areas where the people originated. The average income per household is estimated around US\$ 520 per year. 23% of the household income comes from paddy production, 40% from opium, 7% from livestock and about 23% from off-farm activities. Nasenkham is poor and has food vulnerability and a substantial level of rice insecurity with 71% percent of the households facing three to six months rice deficit. The production of rice is low (148 kg/person/year) and not sufficient. Rice cultivation is low due to limited lowland paddy area. Shifting cultivation cycle is very short with fallow periods of only 1 to 2 years.

Table 2: Nasenkham rice production per capita

Paddy Field	Area (ha)	No. of house-holds	Average farm size (ha)	Area planted (ha)	Area harvested (ha)	Estimated yield (kg/ha)	Estimated production (kg)
Low land	39	46	0.71	33	33	2,500	82,500
Upland	28	56	0.49	14	14	800	11,200
Dry season	0	0	0	0	0		
Total	67			47	47		93,700
Average paddy production per capita (kg)							246.66
Average rice production per capita (kg)							147.99

Source: SPFS Baseline Survey

There is very limited use of existing natural resources. The forest allocated to the village is not rich in NTFP and wildlife. Off-farm activities and opium cultivation are complementing the deficit in rice.

### **3. Women's Participation**

Women work alongside men in agricultural activities and often account for 70 percent or more of the rural workforce in Lao PDR (FAO Fact sheet). Traditionally, men plough, make bunds and prepare seedbeds, and women do more than half of the transplanting of rice, weeding, harvesting, threshing, and post-harvest operations. In the northern uplands, the traditional task division has changed due to lack of male labour. In both northern sites of the SPFS, opium addiction among productive male adults is feminising agriculture. Other factors that determine the shortage of farm labour are the very young population, and migration of young men to town centres seeking more profitable employment opportunities. This causes an extra strain on women, who are increasingly involved in land preparation, irrigation and preparing bunds and seedbeds. It is also noted that shorter fallow period results in more weeding, which affects women's workload directly, since they are mostly responsible for weeding the upland fields (Souvanthalisith 2002). Further, women are mainly responsible for assuring the health, nutrition and feeding of the families. They often choose which foods to purchase and find ways to feed the family when supplies run low.

Women process and store food, prepare and distribute the food that the family eats, collect firewood and carry water. Women's participation in SPFS activities is the key to its success. SPFS in Laos tries to encourage women's participation in project activities and Farmers' Field Schools as much as possible by selecting topics of interest to women, looking at workload of newly introduced technologies and carefully preparing group meetings at a convenient time and place for women. Given that many women have little time to devote to attending group work and training courses, special arrangements have to be made to ensure their participation. In Namleu village, women have indicated that their top priority is improvement of lowland paddy production and the intensification of village handicraft (cotton and bamboo based). The women cultivate organic cotton in the upland and have a long tradition in paper bamboo production. Their main constraint is lack of marketing experience (quality control, labelling, packing, selling procedure, receiving orders, etc.). Further, the handicraft tools and equipment they use are very labour intensive. In Nasenkham village, women's priorities are intensification of fruit-tree plantations (seen as alternative high value crop to substitute opium production), intensification of poultry production, and the intensification of village handicraft and cottage factory. Their main constraints are lack of time and very limited knowledge about marketing their products.

#### **4. Schools without walls**

To reach the communities, the SPFS uses the concept of Farmers' Field School (FFS). The so-called "schools without walls" are centred on sound community-based adult-oriented education practices and are an effective way of transferring knowledge through learning-by-doing. It is a place to learn from each other and build capacity. Rather than simply demonstrating technologies to increase yields, the programme also seeks to look at farming systems as a whole, identify and demonstrate solutions to different problems. Special attention is paid to determining constraints and bottleneck by gender and by specific groups and solutions found. Further, the FFS method used in SPFS follows a multidisciplinary approach in recognition that farmer's problems are multifaceted.

#### **5. Gender integration in FFS**

In general, women in Laos have strong decision-making and labour roles in food security through production and diversification of agriculture. Key to SPFS success is women's participation in all their activities. Their involvement is actively promoted by selecting topics of interest to women and carefully preparing group meetings at a convenient time and place for women. The participants of the FFS for livestock are around 85% women. For mushroom production, they count for 70% of the participants. This is due to the fact that these activities are in general women's domain. However, if we look at women's participation in FFS for rice cultivation, this is rather limited especially the section, which covers land preparation and tillage. Women's participation in the northern sites (36%) is far lower than in the central sites (53%). In Namleu 33% of the FFS participants are women and in Nasengkham 38% are women. Further training to improve gender sensitive extension principles and practices to district staff will be carried out in 2004 as well as training programmes to strengthen the village-level functioning of the Women's Groups.

#### **6. Difficulties in reaching rural women**

*Time limitation:* In spite of these objectives of integrating women, district, provincial and project staff often take very limited time to prepare training materials and field activities. This results in very general training handouts and field activities that are not adapted to local environmental conditions and the interests and needs of different target groups (men, women, elders, etc.). Further, limited time is given to the collection and analysis of secondary data at provincial and district level. In conclusion, the formulation and design of project activities is often done in a short and hastily manner. Due to unfamiliarity with the local conditions,

limited technical knowledge of district staff and the lack of sufficient time to do proper research, discuss, document and negotiate appropriate interventions of the programme, the outcomes are often based on risky assumptions. Hence, SPFS may often risk starting off the wrong way with inappropriate and inadequate facility interventions and activities. To overcome those problems, SPFS is trying to support the district extension staff with technical advisors and tackle the above-mentioned constraints during monitoring and evaluation workshops. In addition, project staff provides training to provincial and district staff in the field once a week to demonstrate new technologies and to motivate and follow up the project activities. They try to identify farmers' interests and adjust some activities accordingly.

*Communication:* The gap between policy/programme and implementation is a severe problem. The programme's policy is often well outlined and documented. However, the implementation of the programme and the delivery of services to the poor villagers stay far behind the actual planning. One of the reasons is the Government's and project staff's own lack of capacity to communicate with the upland villagers and more specifically with upland women. In both sites, communication between villagers and project staff encounters some difficulties. Project staff speaks Lao while the majority of women in both sites do not speak nor understand the Lao language. In general, the chiefs of the villages help interpret during the meetings especially for women and elders. There are some doubts whether those conversations are comprehended and the interpretations are correct. Furthermore, project and district staff accepts the missed information due to wrong translation and thus their full understanding is a concern. There is no questioning whether data is accurate and/or correct. To overcome this problem, SPFS is looking at options to overcome this communication problem by actively looking for translators/interpreters, who do speak and understand the local languages. Also through awareness training of district staff in how to communicate with the farmers (learning to ask why!) is one way to create a better understanding between stakeholders and project staff.

*Participation:* The programme has been designed, planned and implemented with little participation from the villagers in general, although participation is one of the main approaches of the SPFS programme. It is noted that the participation of women in SPFS activities is generally lower than that of men, especially in the field of rice and cash crop cultivation. Those areas are mainly men's domains, in spite of women's major contribution to rice and crop cultivation activities and their ever-increasing responsibilities due to migration



and opium addiction of men. It is also noted that the participation of women in Lao Loum<sup>5</sup> but also Lao Theung<sup>6</sup> societies is higher than among Lao Sung groups. Further, women do not automatically attend meetings unless specifically asked and even encouraged to come. The majority of the women at both sites cannot read and write nor speak the Lao language and/or understand it. This presents a big challenge for the introduction of new and appropriate technologies at the FFS. Another factor that plays a role is women's limited availability. They have a very full schedule in addition to the agricultural production: They are also responsible for the reproductive tasks such as cooking, cleaning, fetching water and collecting firewood. With regard to trainers and district staff, the participation of women is even lower. From all master trainer participants around 10% were women. It is also noted that those women are mainly working in the field of animal husbandry. During the FFS monitoring and evaluation workshops, women's participation is slightly higher up to 20% including 1 woman village chief, district extension staff and NAFES planning division staff.

## **7. Food security and rural women's access**

*Availability* of food is linked to the production capacity of the households for consumption and market, while *access* to food includes ability to obtain food through exchange in kind or cash (Rivera 2003). One of the constraints is that there is very little relevant and reliable information of rural women's roles (social and economic) in household food security in general, including Lao PDR (Balakrishnan 2003). Therefore, the problem identification and needs assessment of the SPFS sites should be broader than just the identification of activities undertaken by men and women in the farm (fields and homes). It should also explain in detail the constraints and bottlenecks women encounter in adopting certain technologies and proposed new activities.

Given the predominant role of women in agriculture and food security, it should be clear that women must be equal partners in the agricultural development process in upland areas. In order to promote agricultural development and enhance food security, it is of vital importance to incorporate gender analysis as an integral component of the programme at all stages and levels (FAO-SEAGA 2003). Further, for women to increase agricultural production they need access to land, which is linked to ownership, property and land rights, and access to credit, which is again linked to landownership. Banks are often less inclined to lend to women, if

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<sup>5</sup> Low-land people

they have no land. Access to agricultural inputs is also of vital importance. Extension service and cooperatives that distribute inputs rarely reach women, who in any case often lack cash to purchase inputs, thus contributing to their low level of production. Access to extension and training services is another area that needs to be improved. Few services focus on women and have little female staff. The extension service tends to focus mainly on commercial rather than subsistence crops. The latter is of primary concern of women. Also access to education, technology, rural organisations (cooperatives, farmer's organisations) and services (transport, markets) will enable women to improve the agricultural production and food security at household level (FAO Gender and Development Plan of Action 2003), which is also important for development in the Lao uplands.

## **8. FAO's role in promoting gender sensitive approaches and technologies relevant for uplands**

The Lao extension programmes could be tailored to address women's priority needs only when men and women farmers are listened to at the village level and when such methods as participatory rural appraisal are employed. FAO could play a vital role at national level in strengthening the capacity of NAFES on gender responsive extension, i.e. an extension system that would be able to reach women farmers (FAO Internal Document 2003).

An important step is to ensure that the staff and programme approaches at NAFES have an understanding of gender and complex ethnic issues in agriculture. NAFES is the largest implementing agency and is strongly linked to provincial and district level staff that interacts directly with rural communities. For that reason, it is important that the staff at NAFES, Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Offices (PAFO) and District Agriculture and Forestry Offices (DAFO) acquire a sound understanding of gender issues in the agricultural sector. Apart from raising gender and ethnic awareness in NAFES, PAFO and DAFO, there is also a great need to increase the number of women extension workers from different ethnic groups.

Since there are many donor agencies working with NAFES, it would be desirable to cooperate and provide technical advice to NAFES in developing a gender responsive extension plan, creating an opportunity to build staff capacity to understand and work with gender issues in the field. A national taskforce could be set up to oversee the development of

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<sup>6</sup> Up-land people

this extension plan and to monitor that donor-funded projects address gender considerations. Another approach can be to provide assistance to develop a gender responsive curriculum in agriculture and rural studies in national institutions, in order to improve the understanding of who does what in agriculture and forestry and how to improve technologies and extension services based on this understanding (FAO Internal Document 2003). FAO can provide technical support for such initiatives with the request from the Government of Lao.

Similar to NAFES, there is also a need to develop the capacities of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) staff members to enhance the understanding of both women's and men's roles in the agriculture and rural development sectors at all levels from the central to household. FAO has the expertise to provide technical assistance support to develop e.g. a Gender Plan of Action similar to the one of FAO (FAO Internal Document 2003). This plan could be linked to NPEP to integrate gender responsive agricultural development and rural poverty reduction strategies.

In addition to the need for enhancing the gender responsiveness of NAFES and MAF, there is a need to increase the awareness of and responsiveness to ethnic groups' livelihoods and needs. Similar problems exist in reaching ethnic groups, as in the case of women farmers. Awareness raising efforts and capacity building of NAFES and MAF staff to work with ethnic groups and gender could go hand in hand and having more ethnic groups and women represented in the extension system.

## **9. Conclusions and recommendations**

Reaching rural women in the uplands is of vital importance in order to ensure that new technologies and alternative development options are suitable for women and sensitive to the division of labour in the uplands (gender sensitive). In addition, there is a need to measure the contribution by women to national food security and household food security. Part of the challenges is the weak capacities of the civil servants in gender analysis. Even more complex is the limited understanding of the upland situation. Lao PDR has some 50 main ethnic groups and more than 200 ethno-linguistic groups on a total population of 5 million (UNDP 2001). The enormous diversity calls for more research and data collection in order to gain the needed understanding of the structures and functioning of local communities. Currently, various research activities in the country are trying to give a clearer picture of the Lao society, although it is still far from being complete. Having difficulties in defining the real

needs that are key to establishing proper programmes, agencies and Government need to better understand the environment they are working in.

Participation is seen as an essential element of effective development. The success of poverty alleviation programmes is based on social mobilisation i.e. involving local communities as active stakeholders. However, underdeveloped staff capabilities also remain a major constraint on the execution of the SPFS programme. The Lao Government has identified human resource development as one priority to reduce poverty but the weaknesses of local capacities and poor participation of local people represents a critical gap that remains in the areas of poverty reduction (UNDP 2001).

Promoting gender equality is an important national goal, as reflected in Articles 22 and 24 of the 1991 Constitution. The recently established National Commission for the Advancement of Women (NCAW-Lao) is guiding the line ministries, agencies and mass organisations on developing strategies and action plans to promote gender equality at national, provincial, district and village levels. For the agricultural sector, this means that research and project planning should integrate gender-related data, more women integrated in project activities, more women staff, etc. (NPEP 2003)

In general, agricultural extension services fail to reach women farmers effectively, also in Laos. One of the reasons is that women are often excluded from rural organisations. A FAO survey shows that worldwide, women farmers receive only 5 % from of all agricultural extension services and only 15% of agricultural extension agents are women (FAO Gender and Development Action 2003). A similar picture is evident in Lao PDR. Development programmes do not address the specific requirements, needs and problems of women farmers. Therefore, they fail to recognise the entire work women farmers do, resulting in mainly targeting male farmers in their programmes (Rivera 2003). This reflects the lack of information and understanding about the important role played by women. It is known that extension services usually focus on cash crops rather than subsistence crops, which are grown mainly by women and which are often the key to household food security. As mentioned earlier, available data on the diverse rural society in Laos is limited and rarely reflect women's responsibility for much of the day-to-day work and decision-making on the family farm. Nor do they recognize the many other important food production and food processing activities that women commonly perform, such as home gardening, tending livestock,

gathering fuel or carrying water. To reach women, SPFS and agricultural extension should also focus on upland cropping (rice and cotton) and vegetable production to improve nutrition and improve food security situation. This is mainly women's area in which they have some control over the in- and outputs. When focussing on cash crop production it is important to verify if there are nearby markets, if women have access to market information, financial facilities and transport, etc. This is normally men's domain as they have access to those things. SPFS is going to conduct a workshop to improve access to markets and have a better understanding about marketing and financial planning. The purpose is building local capacity of provincial and district staff, and village participants, including women as managers of household budgets, in financial planning for enterprise development and diversification. This also includes capacity building in how to assess household cash flow and credit needs.

#### *Some recommendations*

- To increase women participation, it is advisable to organise separate meetings at convenient time and location for women, although there are no cultural obstacles for organising gender-mixed meetings in the two sites.
- Gender equality should be taken into account in the development of training materials, manuals and participatory training programmes of FFS activities. Those should be practical, simple, and visual (many women are illiterate).
- Also involve women farmers and extension workers in FFS activities focussing on the management, conservation and rehabilitation of degraded and problem soils.
- Try to direct the extension system to consider rural women's resources and available time and to target their needs specifically.
- Include gender training and curriculum building activities in FFS and collect information on gender that can be discussed and analysed as well during FFS activities or other meetings.
- Providing more hands-on field training for government and project staff in gender disaggregated data collection, compilation and analysis.

In conclusion, women's empowerment will require a step-by-step process to remove the barriers and tackle the constraints.

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## **Internet**

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